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Honolulu conference, 1966

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President Johnson and the Joint Chiefs

By H.R. McMASTER

As early as May 1964 President Lyndon Johnson seemed to realize that the war in Vietnam would be a costly failure. In a taped phone conversation he confided to National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy, "[It] looks like to me that we're getting into another Korea. It just worries the hell out of me. I don't see what we can ever hope to get out of this." Vietnam was, Johnson said, "the biggest damn mess that I ever saw. . . . It's damn easy to get into a war, but . . . it's going to be harder to ever extricate yourself if you get in." Despite Johnson's premonition, a web of events and decisions had slowly transformed the war into an American conflict. Although many forces such as the ideological imperative to contain communism, bureaucratic structure, and institutional priorities influenced Johnson's decisions, those decisions depended primarily on the character of the President, his motivation, and his advisers. His fixation on domestic political goals, combined with a civil-military relationship based on

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Americans and Vietnamese during maneuvers, 1965.

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distrust, rendered the administration incapable of dealing with the tragic complexities of Vietnam.

Crossing the Threshold

No single decision led to direct intervention in Vietnam. Indeed, involvement began during World War II and grew during the 1950s as the United States first supported the French, then the fledgling nationalist government of South Vietnam against the communist North. The American military effort tripled between 1961 and 1963 as President John Kennedy tried to stabilize a rapidly deteriorating situation in the South. The assassinations of both Ngo Dinh Diem and John Kennedy in November 1963 marked a turning point. After that America would confront a new war.

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Distressed over brutal repression of Buddhist unrest by the South Vietnamese government, the Kennedy administration fomented a coup against its ally that resulted in the murder of Diem and his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu. With Diem gone, as Kennedy noted two weeks before his own death, the United States had "a responsibility to help this new government to be effective in every way we can." As American responsibilities widened, the Viet Cong sought to take advantage of the sudden change of government. The dynamic situation in the South after the coup against Diem added impetus to deliberations in Washington. The new President, Lyndon Johnson, and his advisers concluded that the situation demanded action beyond military advice and support. Between November 1963 and July 1965 critical decisions were made that took the United States into war against the communists.

The next turning point occurred in Spring 1964 when a strategy of graduated pressure was adopted. This strategic concept envisioned applying force at a low level and gradually increasing its scope and intensity and became the blueprint for deepening the American commitment to South Vietnam. It aimed to influence enemy calculations through carefully selected and controlled actions designed to send the right signal.

Initial elements of graduated pressure—covert action against the North—were underway as the United States crossed the threshold of direct involvement. After a North Vietnamese gunboat attacked U.S. destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin on August 2, Johnson seized on the report of an ambiguous second attack on August 4 to mount a political coup against his Republican opponent in the November election, Barry Goldwater. The result was the Gulf of Tonkin resolution which gave the President carte blanche for escalation. From September 1964 to February 1965, he was able to advance domestic agenda items while assigning

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Portable gas station northeast of Saigon, 1966.

Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara to build consensus behind the strategic concept of graduated pressure.

Having refused to respond to Viet Cong assaults on American facilities, the President again advanced the level of intervention in February and March 1965. Following an enemy attack on an air base at Pleiku, Johnson decided on February 9 to initiate systematic limited air strikes against targets in North Vietnam. On February 26 he committed ground forces to South Vietnam. Lastly, on March 15 he quietly approved engaging the Viet Cong by U.S. ground forces. Though none of those actions was tantamount to a clear decision for war, they collectively transformed the Nation's commitment to South Vietnam.

Together the decisions might give the impression of a deliberate administration inclination. Yet Johnson in fact did not want to go to war and had no plans to cross that line. Rather he sought to postpone an explicit choice between war and disengagement indefinitely.

Contriving Consensus

Profoundly insecure, Johnson feared dissent and was obsessed with preventing damaging press leaks. In 1964 he was preoccupied with becoming President in his own right. Vietnam was principally seen as a danger to that end. After the election he feared congressional or public debate over Vietnam would jeopardize efforts to create the Great Society, his domestic legislative program. He could not risk failure. McNamara would help the President protect his electoral chances and enact the Great Society by providing a Vietnam strategy that appeared cheap and could be pursued with minimal public and congressional scrutiny. The McNamara approach of graduated pressure would permit Johnson to pursue his objective of not losing the war while postponing the day of reckoning and preserving the illusion of continuity with the policies of previous administrations.

Johnson's desire for consensus rather than debate shaped his relations with the Joint Chiefs of Staff and his other advisers and determined who exerted influence over Vietnam policy. When circumstances seemed to demand military action, the President did not turn to the chiefs to explore the consequences of expansion. He went instead to his civilian advisers to find ways to postpone a decision. He used McNamara to shield him from calls for more resolute action and the Secretary's visits to Saigon gave the impression military recommendations were under serious consideration. Forming ad hoc interdepartmental study groups had a similar effect. Additionally, McNamara used the Chairman, General Maxwell Taylor, to check recommendations forwarded by the Joint Chiefs. Taylor, who thought his role was to be a "true believer in the foreign policy and military strategy of the administration which he serves," shielded Johnson from views advanced

by his less politically sensitive colleagues while telling the chiefs their recommendations had received full consideration. To prevent the Joint Chiefs from expressing dissenting views, Taylor helped craft a civil-military relationship in which the President obscured the finality of decisions and made false suggestions that the chief's conception of the war might one day be realized. Meanwhile, with the Joint Chiefs relegated to the margins, civilian planners developed a flawed strategy for fighting what seemed to them a war without precedent.

Graduated Pressure

McNamara was confident that he could help the President postpone a decision between war and disengagement. He believed nuclear weapons and the Cold War environment made traditional military thinking not only irrelevant but dangerous. Accordingly, with systems analysts and other civilians in the Pentagon and the Department of State, he developed plans independent of military advice and the historical record. Bolstered by what he regarded as a personal triumph during the Cuban missile crisis, he applied that experience to Vietnam. A principal assumption of graduated pressure, that carefully controlled and severely limited military action was reversible and thus could be carried out at minimal risk and cost, allowed McNamara and Johnson to avoid facing many of the consequences of their actions. Graduated pressure created the illusion that attacks on the North were means of communication and alternatives to—rather than acts of—war. Because the favored method of communication (bombing fixed installations and economic targets) was not appropriate against a guerrilla force, McNamara and his colleagues pointed to the infiltration of both men and supplies as proof that the source of enemy power lay north of the 16th parallel, specifically in Hanoi. They derived their definition of the source from the strategy of graduated pressure rather than a critical examination of the reality in South Vietnam.

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Graduated pressure was fundamentally flawed in other ways. It ignored the uncertainty of war and the unpredictable psychology of an activity that involves killing and destroying. To the North Vietnamese, attacks on their forces and bombing of their territory were not simply means of communication. Human sacrifice evokes strong emotions that create a dynamic that defies systems analysis quantification. Once America crossed the threshold with covert raids and Gulf of Tonkin reprisals, the course of events depended not only on decisions made in Washington, but also on unpredictable enemy responses. But McNamara viewed the war as another business management problem that would succumb to rational calculations. He and his whiz kids thought that they could predict with precision what amount of force would achieve the desired result and that they could control that force with precision from halfway around the world. However, there were compelling arguments that graduated pressure would not convince Hanoi to desist from fomenting insurgency but in fact could lead to escalation. General Harold Johnson, Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army, doubted that even the total destruction of North Vietnam would end the insurgency. Nevertheless, McNamara refused to consider the consequences of his strategy and forged ahead oblivious to the nature of the conflict and the human and psychological complexities of war.

Despite the recognition that graduated pressure was fatally flawed, the Joint Chiefs were unable to articulate their objections or alternatives. Interservice rivalry was an impediment. Although their differing service perspectives and interests were understandable, the chiefs were obligated by law to render their best advice. Both a failure to do so and a willingness to present single-service remedies prevented them from thinking effectively about strategy. They in large measure abdicated their statutory responsibility as principal military advisers.

When it became apparent that the Joint Chiefs were to have little influence on policy, they refused to confront the President with objections to McNamara's approach. Instead they attempted to work within that strategy to gradually remove limitations on further action. Unable to develop an alternative to graduated pressure, they became fixated on means and pressed for escalation by degrees. They hoped graduated pressure would evolve into an essentially different strategy more attuned with their belief in greater force and its more resolute application. In so doing, they gave tacit approval to graduated pressure as the President escalated the war. They failed to recommend the force levels that they believed would ultimately be required and accepted a large but inadequate number of troops for an extended period with little hope for success. Lacking a strategy, the Joint Chiefs and the senior American officer in Vietnam, General William Westmoreland, equated military activity with progress and focused on a tactical task, killing the enemy.

F–8 attacking enemy stronghold, 1966

U.S. Navy

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Marines boarding *USS Lenawee* for Vietnam, 1965.

The Whiz Kids

Johnson and McNamara were far from disappointed with the failings of the Joint Chiefs. The President, because of domestic priorities, had little use for advice that was inconsistent with his political objectives. Meanwhile, McNamara resolved to take advantage of their weaknesses. He reported to Johnson in March 1964 that a divide-and-conquer approach to the chiefs was going well. For military advice, McNamara relied primarily on his whiz kids at the Pentagon, a group of young analysts who McNamara and Kennedy had drawn into government service. They considered military experience a liability because soldiers took a narrow view and based advice on antiquated notions of warfare. One top analyst likened leaving decision-making to the professional military to allowing welfare workers to develop national welfare programs. The whiz kids used statistics to analyze defense programs and issues and then provided the Secretary and the President with the information to make decisions. The whiz kids saw no limits to the applicability of their methods. They sought maximum political payoff in Vietnam at minimal military cost and assumed that Ho Chi Minh, when faced with a threat of military muscle, would behave reasonably and end support for the communist insurgency.

It should not be surprising that the way in which the United States went to war between November 1963 and July 1965 would profoundly

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Ambassador Taylor and General Westmoreland, 1965.

influence the conduct of the conflict and its outcome. Policy decisions were based on domestic political expediency. The President was intent on forging a consensus behind what he believed was a middle ground policy that would not alienate key constituencies on which his domestic goals depended. The administration deliberately avoided clarifying objectives and postponed discussing the level of force it was willing to commit. Indeed, because Johnson was seeking a political consensus built on lies and obfuscation, members of the administration believed that ambiguous objectives were a strength rather than a weakness. Civilian planners in the Departments of Defense and State concluded they could preserve American credibility after a show of force against Hanoi in which Americans were bloodied. That approach, combined with the notion that force was merely a form of diplomatic communication, militated in favor of stalemate rather than victory. After the United States became committed to war, however, and more Americans died in combat, it would become impossible to simply disengage and declare national credibility intact. This should have been foreseen.

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The Team

The Joint Chiefs sensed the ambiguity in Johnson's policy but did not directly challenge the views of civilian planners. Thus when the United States went to war, the chiefs pursued different goals from the President and Secretary. When they sought permission to apply force consistent with their conception of U.S. objectives, Johnson and McNamara, based on their own goals and domestic political constraints, rejected their requests or granted them only in part. The Joint Chiefs and Secretary focused on means rather than ends, and on tactics rather than a strategy designed to connect military actions to achievable policy objectives.

Instead of advice, McNamara and Johnson extracted acquiescence and silent support from the Joint Chiefs for decisions that they had already made. Even as the chiefs were relegated to the margins, a facade of consultation was preserved to preclude them from opposing administration policies openly or from behind the scenes. As involvement escalated, the President's vulnerability to disaffected senior officers increased because he was deceiving Congress and the public about the nature of the military effort. To keep the chiefs on the team, the President and Secretary obscured their decisions and left their limits on the use of force undefined. In April 1965, Johnson promised the money, material, and effort needed to defeat the Viet Cong. He played to the sympathy of the Joint Chiefs, referring to himself as the coach and the chiefs as his team.

The ultimate test of loyalty came in July 1965. Administration falsehoods increased in magnitude as the conflict escalated. The President misrepresented the mission of ground forces, distorted the views of the military to lend credibility to his decision against mobilization, grossly understated the number of troops requested, and misled Congress about the cost of actions already taken and those awaiting decision. The President was lying and he expected the Joint Chiefs to do the same, or at least withhold the whole truth. They did not disappoint him. In the days before Johnson made his duplicitous statement of July 28, 1965 about Westmoreland's request for more ground units, they withheld from Congress their estimates of the forces needed and their belief that mobilization was necessary, thereby lending silent support to Johnson's deceptions.

Several factors kept the chiefs from challenging this subterfuge. They felt genuine loyalty to the President as Commander in Chief. Moreover, the Truman-MacArthur controversy during the Korean War reminded them of the danger of overstepping their bounds under civilian control of the military. Any action that could undermine administration credibility and derail Vietnam policy could not be undertaken lightly. For one, General Earle Wheeler, who became Chairman in July 1964, believed the war could "be lost in

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Troops conducting search-and-destroy mission, 1966.

Washington if Congress loses faith." Parochialism also played its part. Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral David McDonald, and the Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Wallace Greene, both compromised themselves for concessions to their respective services. Moreover, the characters of the chiefs predisposed them to acquiescence rather than confrontation. The strength of the Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army, General Johnson, lay in perseverance under difficulty rather than challenging the administration, an act that he would regret for the rest of his life. General John McConnell, when interviewed for the position of Chief of Staff of the Air Force, promised his full support to the President even if he felt administration policies were flawed. He believed his role was to provide the National Command Authorities with "suitable alternatives for the application of military power" so the President and Secretary could "choose the one that best solved the problem as they saw it."

Although the chiefs must give Congress their best advice based on professional experience, they must not overstep the bounds of civil control of the military or undermine their credibility by crossing the line between advice and advocacy. Because the U.S. Constitution places that control in Congress as well as in the executive, they could not have been justified in misleading the people through their representatives about Vietnam. During the critical period in which Vietnam became an American war, a deceitful and manipulative civil-military relationship allowed the President to deny Congress and the public to openly voice their views in the most momentous issue a nation faces.

Because forthright communication between civilian officials and military officers was never established in the Johnson administration, there was no reconciliation of the intention on the part of McNamara to sharply limit the military effort and the assessment by the Joint Chiefs that the United States could not possibly win under such conditions. Had there been such an exchange, everyone would have recognized the futility. Instead, the chiefs lent credibility to the President's deceptions, aiding him in forestalling meaningful debate, and focused on a tactical task, killing the enemy.

The Westmoreland strategy of attrition was in essence the absence of a strategy. The result was military activity (bombing targets in the North and killing the enemy forces in the South) with no realistic objective. As casualties mounted, the public lost faith. The chiefs did not request the level of troops necessary to impose a military solution until after the Tet offensive in 1968. But by then the President was besieged by opponents to the war and unable to even consider the matter.

Lyndon Johnson thought he could control U.S. involvement in Vietnam. That conviction, based on a strategy of graduated pressure and assurances by Robert McNamara, proved false. The President should not have been surprised by the consequences of his decisions between November 1963 and July 1965. He had disregarded advice he did not want to hear in favor of a policy based on the pursuit of his own political fortunes and domestic programs. The disaster in Vietnam was not the result of impersonal forces but of a uniquely human failure, the responsibility for which was shared by Johnson and his key advisers. The failings were many and reinforcing: arrogance, weakness, lying in the pursuit of self-interest, and above all the abdication of responsibility to the American people. JFQ

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Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

(October 1997–September 2001)

I would like to share my thoughts with the readers of Joint Force Quarterly *on the enduring priorities of the Armed Forces. After many years in uniform I have learned three basic lessons that focus my activities as Chairman. The first is that in our lethal profession there is no substitute for being ready when called. The next is that our people and their families are our most precious asset and that if we take care of them they will never let the Nation down. Finally, we must think about tomorrow even while fighting today. These are my priorities. Are we ready? Do we take proper care of our people? Are we preparing adequately for the future? Answers to these questions will define our success as a joint force well into the next century.*

Joint Guardian.

55th Signal Company (Angelica M. Harris)

As the premier military power in the world we enjoy a unique opportunity to learn from the past and apply its lessons to ensure our continued freedom and prosperity. The 20th century has seen high achievement and stark tragedy, but America has emerged with the strength and vision to play a leading role in international peace and stability. We must move forward with determination to shape the future for our children and their children. With the continued support of Congress and the American people, I am confident that the Armed Forces will help build a new century, perhaps the best we have yet known.

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